Depot Town Rag

Volume 22, Number 6

August 2007

All our history is not ancient

100% FREE *RAG* CONTENT

A PUBLICATION OF THE DEPOT TOWN ASSOCIATION, INC. The Old Caboose, 400 Market Place, Ypsilanti, Michigan 48198

DTA's first president remembers it all

It didn't look like this down here in the early 1970s. The French brothers had just gotten out of the Army and wondered about buying their dad's Alibi Bar. Like every bar in town, his establishment reflected the workingman's ethic of the time and younger brother Gerry wondered if that was what he really wanted to get into.

"I looked at the river and the two parks and thought there could be more to this place than just this," he remembers. With EMU just up the street, French figured a few changes in the local environment might draw students to the block. He started looking around for alliances. "The City had plenty of development plans in their files, but none of them had the necessary components to make them work," he recalls.

French met with successful city planners in Frankenmuth, Plymouth, and Marshall to see how they had revitalized their old downtown districts and he decided this little corner of Ypsilanti could do it too.

Long-time business people in the block told him there was "no future in it" and his first attempt at organizing the district failed for lack of interest. Merchants up the street in Campus Town had no faith in making an alliance with Depot Town. Neither did the Chamber of Commerce or any existing groups in town. "We took the original idea and did our due diligence to facilitate meetings of merchants and property owners. Beverly Shankwiler was an actual confounder with me. Bev was heavily involved in establishing direction and helping the community to make this work. Because of their passion for historical preservation, we involved Jane Bird and Nat Edmunds from City Council to help DTA *[continued overleaf]*

1976 *Depot Town Study* hoped to save these old structures

A Preservation Plan for the Improvement of Depot Town Ypsilanti, Michigan

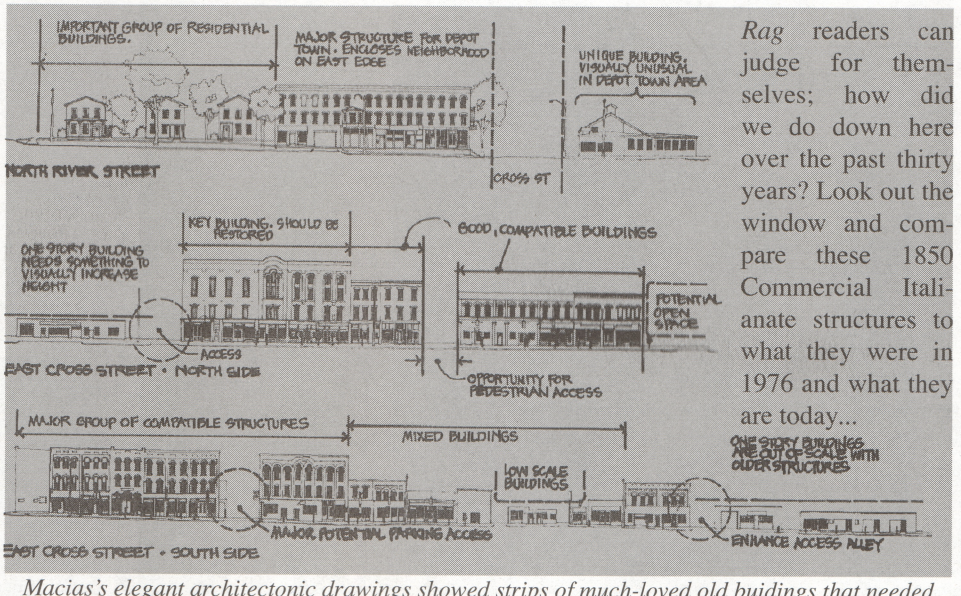
6 August 1976
The City of Ypsilanti and
The People of Depot Town,
now and in the future:

We are pleased to submit this report for one of the City's most important areas. The study, which began in January of this year analyses the problems and resources of Depot Town. Its recommendations are varied because they are directed at both the public and the private sectors of the city. Its goal, however, is to improve an urban neighborhood and do so through an understanding of its past, its present and its potentials.

Respectfully submitted,

Richard Macias, Preservation/Urban Deisgn/Incorporated

Few copies remain of the 46-page Depot Town Study that caused locals to dream of saving the disrict for those who might tire of consumer malls going up out on the highway

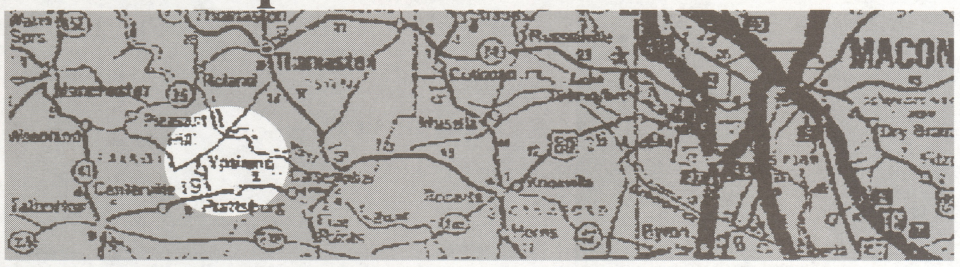

IMPORTANT GROUP OF RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS.
MAJOR STRUCTURE FOR DEPOT TOWN. ENCLOSES NEIGHBORHOOD ON EAST EDGE
UNIQUE BUILDING. VISUALLY UNUSUAL IN DEPOT TOWN AREA
NORTH RIVER STREET
CROSS ST
KEY BUILDING. SHOULD BE RESTORED
GOOD, COMPATIBLE BUILDINGS
ONE STORY BUILDING NEEDS SOMETHING TO VISUALLY INCREASE HEIGHT
POTENTIAL OPEN SPACE
ACCESS
EAST CROSS STREET - NORTH SIDE
OPPORTUNITY FOR PEDESTRIAN ACCESS
MAJOR GROUP OF COMPATIBLE STRUCTURES
MIXED BUILDINGS
ONE STORY BUILDINGS ARE OUT OF SCALE WITH OLDER STRUCTURES
LOW SCALE BUILDINGS
MAJOR POTENTIAL PARKING ACCESS
ENHANCE ACCESS ALLEY
EAST CROSS STREET - SOUTH SIDE

Macias's elegant architectonic drawings showed strips of much-loved old buidings that needed serious renovation to meet current city codes. The study's text encouraged owners and users to respect their history and continue their long legacy as a practical, workingman's neighborhood.

Rag readers can judge for themselves; how did we do down here over the past thirty years? Look out the window and compare these 1850 Commercial Italianate structures to what they were in 1976 and what they are today...

Here *comes* the neighborhood!

Another Ypsilanti...near the *Flint* River



Michiganders may be surprised to learn that Ypsilanti lies between Manchester and Macon but, if you're in the state of Georgia, it makes perfect sense. There are only five houses and one church in Ypsilanti, GA, but those Ypsilantians may be confused about the great name we share.

Located in Georgia's "Redbone Community," this was one of the first areas of Indian Territory settled after the Cherokee Treaty of 1827. Local lore says, "the [Redbone] name apparently comes from the Indian translation which probably referred to the fact that is was wonderful hunting territory."

The area was a prosperous place and in 1856 a Post Office was established. The office was discontinued as the Civil War disrupted most of the area's infrastructure.

In 1883 the area again was rewarded a Post Office but, as the May 22, 1883 *Talbotton New Era* (local newspaper) said, "The name YPSILANTI was given by the Post Office in Washington for the reason that there was another Post Office in Georgia by the name of REDBONE." Mail was delivered twice a week from nearby PRATTSBURG, but in 1916 the office closed again.

Ypsi, GA is located just off Pobiddy Road, midway between highway US-80 and the Flint River. A large State-owned wildlife management area (Lazar Creek) makes wild game and hunting an economic asset. Large stands of old timber make logging one of the main industries there.

Depot Towners agree: old is okay *-Will Rogers*

• Some people try to turn back their odometers. Not me; I want people to know *why* I look this way. I've traveled a long way and some of the roads weren't paved.

• One of the many things no one tells you about aging is that it is such a nice change from being young.

• Being young is beautiful, but being old is comfortable.

• One must wait until evening to see how splendid the day has been.

• If you don't learn to laugh at trouble, you won't have anything to laugh at when you are old.

Gerry French

[continued from page one] in our organizing process and to get us the grant money for the Master Plan."

This nucleus brought the Michigan Artrain for its first stop here and thousands came down to see what was going on in the old railroad district.

For many, it was the first time they had ventured into the area in many years. "At first we attracted the artists and gays—the first urban pioneers. They were to become the catalyst to start our redevelopment and continue to play an important part of our heritage," says French.

He and brother Bill implemented other plans even closer to home. Their new standards at the Alibi Bar included hiring "pretty girls" to work the bar, napkins under the beer bottles, and no profanity. "In a very short time," French recalls, "the place started to change for the better."

On the street, the standards were more difficult to establish. "You gotta have a plan," was the theme of French's mentors. "Get organized and develop a ten-year plan," they said. And they did.

French and others organized a majority of the merchants into a non-profit incorporation to bring in a professional specialist to develop a plan for the preservation of Ypsilanti's run-down depot district. Their *Depot Town Study* was published in 1976 and became the first standard for development and preservation of the block-long commercial neighborhood. City Council put their stamp of approval on it and Ypsilanti's Historic District followed soon afterward.

Things are a lot different down at the depot as a result. "I thought ten years would be plenty of time," remembers DTA's first president, "but now we're in our thirtieth year and it seems we have achieved most of those goals."

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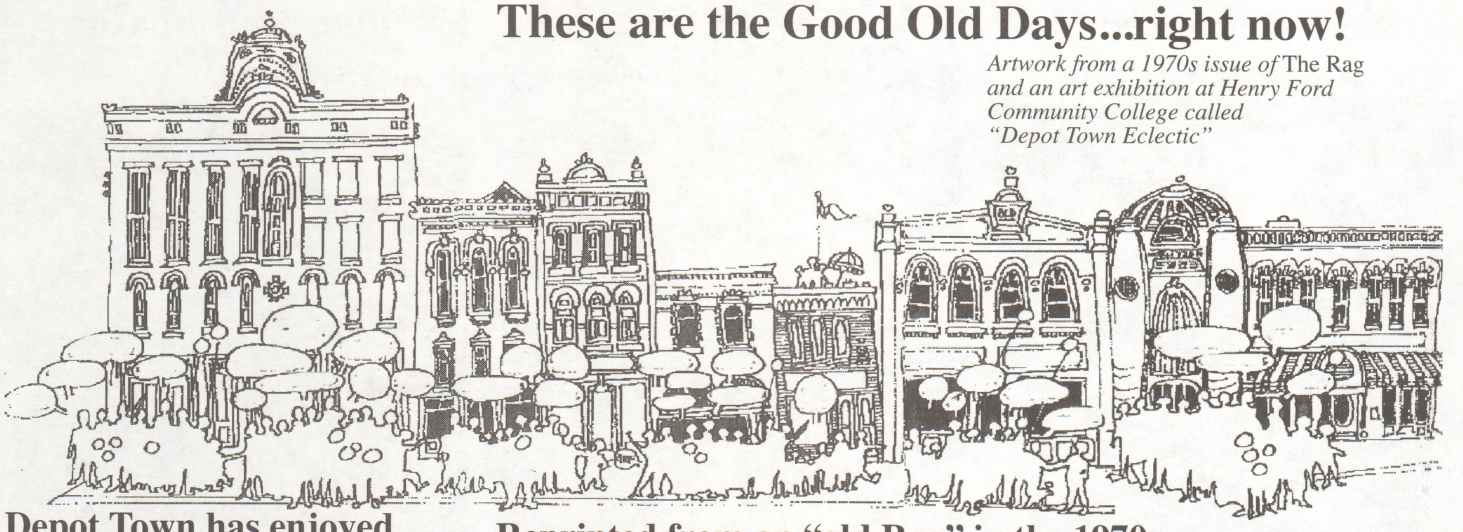
These are the Good Old Days...right now!

Artwork from a 1970s issue of The Rag *and an art exhibition at Henry Ford Community College called "Depot Town Eclectic"*



Depot Town has enjoyed such success in recent years that some propose the street be changed to "Skid Drive"

Ken Richards writes:

Someone who drinks too much and is unemployed is said to be "on skid-row," and that part of a city that is filled with rundown old buildings and unemployed drunks is often called skid-row.

This is actually a corruption of the earlier expression "skid road." A "skid road" was a road in a logging district consisting of a set of peeled logs or timbers, partially sunk into the ground, and forming a roadway along or down which logs could be drawn or slid. Such "skid roads" were, apparently, quite common in the American timber industry – especially in the 19th century as the growing nation felled thousands of acres of virgin timber.

But it was one particular "skid road" that gave rise to the current expression. In the early days the city of Tacoma, near Seattle, on America's Pacific North West coast, flourished on its timber production, and with many lonely lumberjacks it attracted a remarkably large number of bars and brothels. These flourished on one of the rough "skid roads" of Tacoma – eventually taking on the name given to the road.

From this (over time) "skid road" became skid row – and a synonym for a wide range of assorted degeneracy.

Reprinted from an "old Rag" in the 1970s:

Heritage: It's an involving situation

High property taxes got you down? Has the Savings and Loan scandal almost convinced you that you should, maybe, register to vote? Nothing any good on television this week? This month? This year? Are you among those former dippy, hippie, Yippie, Yuppie drop-outs looking for meaning in your life? Welcome to Depot Town.

You have found yourself in a never-never land akin to Rod Serling's Twilight Zone, only this one's real. You have not been transported back into some pre-mall time warp. This is real. And it's not a commercial for a carbonated beverage or America's Heartland automobiles, either.

Those people who smile at you as you pass on the sidewalks are not animated figures in a theme park; they are real live human beings who are just there because they want to be. Nobody's paying them to be nice. That's just the way they are.

Those folks who talked to you from the next table in the restaurant aren't selling insurance. They just wanted to know if you really liked your sandwich because they've always seen it on the menu but had never tried it themselves. It wasn't a sales trick. Even if you didn't drive a pick-up truck into the neighborhood, you're still welcome here.

Depot Town's ambiance wasn't made up by some corporate headquarters and pressed into plastic to be franchised all over the world. But it could have been. There are plenty of other depot towns out there. Almost every small town along a railroad track has a district that's been forgotten about since the folks started going to the shopping mall out on the Big Road.

Why not sell our condo and move into the old Grange Hall and make pottery? Or bump out car fenders for the rest of our lives and sit out on the sidewalk and have lunch and wave at the trains as they pass?

If "finalize" is to make final, then "realize" is to make real—and there are fewer places in today's society where you can get closer to civilized reality than in Ypsilanti's historic Depot Town.

"Let's have a meeting down at the malt shop (ice cream parlor, tavern, caboose) and plan a big dance (fashion show, jazz concert) to raise funds for saving the old Town Hall (train station, signal tower, Freighthouse). My dad will let us use his barn and . . ." Andy Hardy is alive and well and living in Ypsilanti's historic Depot Town.

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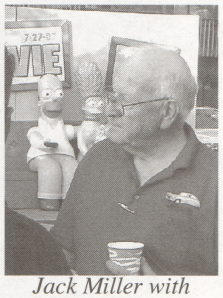
Born to be Mild!

The God's Children Motorcycle Club was once the talk of the town down here. Things change. Tuesday nights in Depot Town seem to have a more modest theme today...

Fox 2's Lee Thomas and Fanchon Stinger



Jack Miller with Homer and Marge

Fair & Balanced surrealism comes to Depot Town

It probably looked almost real on TV, but when the Fox 2 News team set up their equipment alongside the DTA Caboose for their "Zip Trip to Ypsilanti" on 6 July, reality seemed to fly out the window and electronic surrealism took its place:

- The "talent" sat in directors' chairs to smile and read copy on cue. Producers and directors scurried around doing their work.
- Local interview subjects spoke well but left their seats before camera switches.
- Jack Miller seemed puzzled at the life-size plastic display of the Simpson cartoon family in the Market Plaza.
- Antique autos were lined up against the off-limits Freighthouse to look like a typical Cruise Night. Thankfully, the depot was not featured.
- The *Rag* editor made it clear to Fox producers that he saw this as an attempted by a hostile take-over by Rupert Murdoch.

But a band played and an Elvis tribute artist performed, and Depot Towners were gracious as they entertained the Big City newsies. Ypsi looked good—but slightly compressed. We look much thinner on TV.

No apologies; just fun

There was a time when Ypsilantians thought "heritage" was going to mean "history," but our annual festival changed all that. Now our history is defined by things and ideas collected by default.

This issue of *The Rag* attempts to put some of that default to rest, but not to worry: popular culture just keeps on keeping on and we expect we will see beer can art, historical sun glasses, monkeys-on-a-stick, and hand-painted ceramic overhead fan pull knobs for some time to come.

Enjoy the hoopla. Historical accuracy be damned. Let's get out there and dance!

In the next Rag:

Our annual pitch for railway safety at the dangerous crossings in this old depot district pairs with our fondness for railfan nostalgia. Not meant just for the kids, it's practical advice for every age of Depot Towner.

Depot Town Rag

"All the news that fits, we print"
A monthly publication of
the Depot Town Association, Inc.
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Ypsilanti, Michigan 48197
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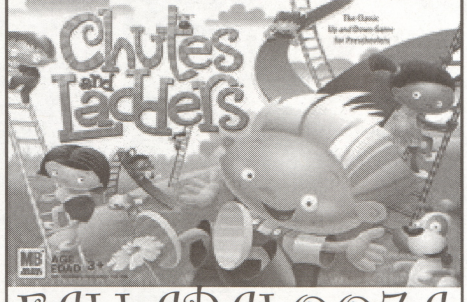
thomasdodd@comcast.net

The Depot Town Association, Inc.

Gary McKeever, President
Mary Decker, Vice President
Ray Strassel, Treasurer
Sandee French, Scy. & Past President
Website: www.depottown.org
DTA meets at 6:30 p.m on the third Wednesday of each month at Café Luwak, 42 East Cross Street.



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Deep, historical background:

Ypsi folks smile when others have difficulty spelling or pronouncing our city's gorgeous name, but who could smile when they realize we may have been *spelling it wrong ourselves* since 1825?

According to Wikipedia, "Demetrius Ypsilanti, *sometimes spelled Ypsilantis*, (1793 - January 3, 1832) , second son of Prince Constantin, distinguished himself as a Russian officer in the campaign of 1814 and, in the spring of 1821, went to the Morea, where the war of Greek independence had just broken out."

Sometimes spelled? Hey, now Wikipedia and all other reference sources, what's the deal here? Consistency counts—in the business of naming cities at least—and Ypsilantians (Ypsilantisites?) deserve some degree of accuracy for their recognition of the hero of the Greek War for Independence. How would we like it if all the "Washingtons" (State, District of Columbia, counties, towns, villages, etc.) had been spelled "Washintin" instead?

We are surrounded by commercial signs that do not know where to put their apostrophe (Tim Hortons, McDonalds, Starbucks), but dropping a whole letter totally confuses our understanding of singular, plural, and possessive.

History lesson:

Demitrius Ypsilantis was one of the most conspicuous of the Phanariot leaders during the earlier stages of the revolt, though he was much hampered by the local chiefs and by the civilian element headed by Mavrocordatos. In January 1822, he was elected president of the legislative assembly; but the ill-success of his campaign in central Greece and his failure to obtain a commanding position in the national convention of Astros led to his retirement early in 1823. In 1828, he was appointed by Capo d' Istria commander of the troops in East Hellas. He succeeded, on 25 September 1829, in forcing the Turkish commander Aslan Bey to sign a capitulation at the Pass of Petra, which ended the active operations of the war.

He was known for his affair with Manto Mavrogenous.

He died at Vienna on the 3rd of January 1832.

Later on Wikipedia notes, "He was brother of Alexander Ypsilantis" and that ought to be enough proof for us. If his brother's name had an 'S' at the end, so did his.

Who ever heard of a great Greek whose name did not end in "S"?

- Theseus, The Athenian Adventurer
- Lycurgus, The Father of Sparta
- Aristides, The Just
- Pericles, The Olympian
- Nicias, The Slave of Fear
- Agesilaus, The Lame King of Sparta
- Pelopidas, The Freedom Fighter
- Pyrrhus, The Fool of Hope
- Demitrius and Alexander Ypsilantis
- John Kornilakis, The Owner of the Old Town Restaurant
- Sotiros Adamoupolos, The Student in the Editor's WCC Class

And don't forget about Athens, Indianapolis, and Minneapolis

Monument of Demetrius Ypsilantis in Athens, Greece– – not the one by the Water Tower in Ypsilanti, Michigan, USA. with no "s" at the end!

How Ypsi lost its 'S'

It was all Gus Woodward's fault. Augustus B. Woodward was appointed chief of the Michigan Territory's first three judges, having arrived in Detroit right after the great fire of 1805. He had persuaded the citizens in that burned-out frontier town he could create the best plan for the future, based on the layout of Washington, D.C. and Paris, France. Woodward laid out Grand Circus Park and Washington Boulevard and then named the main street for himself. "I called it Woodward, meaning toward the woods," he said. Yeah; sure.

Greeks (and others) grieve for the lost letter

Years later it was dubbed "M-1" to commemorate the first paved road in Michigan.

When Woodward later came to Ypsilanti, he was able to name another street for himself but somehow a letter was dropped from the name and for many years the street just a few blocks south of the Chicago Road (Michigan Avenue) was called "Woodard Street." That error has been recently corrected.

But Gus Woodward's duplicity and ego did not stop there.

After moving the settlement of Woodruff's Grove to the Sauk Trail/Chicago Road, community activists suggested new names for the hamlet. Some favored "Waterville," while others thought "Palmyra" a good handle. Woodward favored "Ypsilantis" to honor the Greek hero who had made international news that year. Since he already knew his way around Detroit, he volunteered to register the group's nomination with the Territorial government there.

Swamped "S"

On his ride east, he encamped in a wetland just north of today's Metropolitan Airport. As he neared Detroit unaccompanied by the local committee, he threw out the other suggestions and offered his own proposal. But he had also dropped the "S" somewhere in the wetlands and nobody noticed the error.

Years later, that wetland area north of Metro incorporated and somebody found Woodward's lost "S" in the swamp. They simply added it to "wetland" and became "Westland."

Now that the sordid and selfish history has been exposed, Ypsilantians rise as one to demand the people of Westland return the "S" to its rightful owners: Ypsilantis.

Note to Mayor Schreiber:
For this year's Mayor's Exchange Day, you could invite Westland's politicos to exchange gifts. Maybe they'll bring back our "s".

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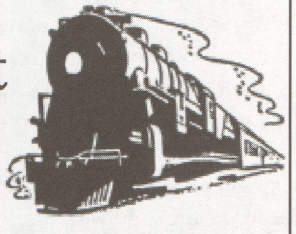
Rosie the Riveter was an Ypsi woman

Almost everyone recognizes the Rosie poster for females joining the workforce during WWII, and there was the real Rosie: Rose Will Monroe. She was a riveter, building B24 bombers at the Willow Run plant at Ypsilanti, when officials asked her to star in a promotional film about the war effort. She became a patriotic icon, synonymous with thousands of women who took defense-industry jobs, working factory positions usually held by men. Monroe left Michigan after the war, drove a taxi, operated a beauty shop and started her own home construction firm in Indiana called Rose Builders. She died in 1997.

The Great Train Race



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Exaggerated history is not new here

Long before Rupert Murdock and Fox News, an Italian newspaper published this painting of the 1939 train wreck at Ypsilanti, Michigan, as if the artist had been on the scene of the accident. Folks in the patio at the Sidetrack still like to imagine the calamity that took down the corner building, but their imagination may pale next to this image reminiscent of the San Francisco earthquake and fire.

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